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PROGRAM NBC Nightly News

STATION WRC-TV  
NBC Network

DATE February 6, 1983 6:30 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Probe of Assassination Attempt

CHRIS WALLACE: George Bush is in Italy tonight, continuing his trip through Western Europe to sell the Reagan nuclear arms policy. But on this stop, NBC News has learned that the Vice President has a secret mission, to tell Italian leaders to continue their probe into the shooting of Pope John Paul, even if that investigation ends up involving the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb reports.

MARVIN KALB: It is not on the Vice President's public agenda, but we've learned he's been instructed by the White House to assure anxious Italian leaders that President Reagan fully supports their controversial investigation into the papal plot, even if the trail leads to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov.

During his visit to the U.S. Embassy in Rome today, Bush had a related chore, to stop all leaks, principally from CIA officials, that tended to dishearten the Italians and discourage the investigation. Similar leaks from CIA officials in Washington flooded the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal this past week, stating, among other things, that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who tried to kill the Pope, was crazy; and therefore neither the Bulgarians nor the Russians would have used him. But on this point, it seems that either the CIA is badly informed or chooses, for whatever reason, to badly inform the public, because the evidence suggests Agca was anything but crazy.

Severino Santiapichi, the Roman magistrate who sat in on the early interrogations:

SEVERINO SANTIAPICHI [translated]: That all the

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interrogations of Agca reveal a lucidity.

KALB: Cardinal Silvio Oddi, a senior Vatican official.

CARDINAL SILVIO ODDI: And this man, he was not a fool. It's proved. He's an intelligent man. He's a killer, really, a professional.

KALB: So agitated is the White House that National Security Adviser William Clark and CIA Director William Casey conferred last week and ordered a full-scale investigation into the CIA leaks, and warned in messages to the U.S. Embassy in Rome that the leakers will be severely punished.

Why would CIA officials choose to go against company orders and administration policy? There is no clear answer as yet. What is clear is that the President's men have put out the word that if Andropov is found to be implicated in the papal plot and if this damages the arms control negotiations, then so be it. The President is described as wanting the whole truth out and letting the chips fall where they may.